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SUBJECT: RUSSIA DECLINES USG REQUEST TO EXTEND JOINT SMALLPOX
RESEARCH THROUGH ISTC

REF: A. 08 Moscow 1420
[1](#)B. State 18854

MOSCOW 00002199 001.2 OF 002

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On August 12, Russian federal authorities informed the International Science and Technology Center (ISTC) that the government will not support resumption of three U.S.-funded smallpox projects at the Vector Center for Virology and Biotechnology near Novosibirsk. In a curt letter, Russia's chief medical officer notified ISTC that the Russian government already has sufficient funding for smallpox research. Although this puts an end to two years of USG efforts to convince the Russian government to resume USG-supported smallpox research at Vector through ISTC, there are signs that Vector might be allowed to work with international scientists on certain projects under certain conditions. Although the Russian government is clearly sensitive about U.S. cooperation with Vector on smallpox and other issues, the USG should consider whether and how it wants to continue a dialogue with the GOR on joint work on smallpox, with or without access to Vector. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On August 12, ISTC received notification via a sharply worded letter from Dr. Gennadiy Onishchenko, Chief of the Russian Federal Service for Consumer Protection and Human Welfare (Rospotrebnadzor), that USG-funded support for orthopoxvirus research at the high-security Vector Center for Virology and Biotechnology near Novosibirsk is no longer required. (Note: Vector is the only Russian facility with declared smallpox samples. End note.) Onishchenko's letter, dated August 4, came in response to an inquiry from State Duma Deputy Boris Nikonov asking Rospotrebnadzor to support amendments to continue and expand the three ISTC smallpox projects at Vector. Onishchenko's letter reminds ISTC that all project proposals presented to ISTC require approval of the Russian government, which reserves the exclusive prerogative to decide on the suitability of those projects for implementation by Russian organizations. The letter concludes that orthopoxvirus research at Vector is already adequately funded by the Russian government.

TWO YEARS OF EFFORTS TO EXTEND THREE PROJECTS

13. (SBU) The following three joint smallpox projects with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Department of Defense began at Vector in 2001:

-- "Conservation of Genetic Material and Study of Genomic Structure of Different Variola Virus Strains";

-- "Combinatorial Antibody Libraries to Orthopoxviruses"; and

-- "Search for Antivirals for Treating and Prevention of Orthopoxviral Infections, Including Smallpox."

In 2007, the U.S. proposed extending the projects to build upon the completed research and expand cooperation. Former HHS Secretary Leavitt raised the request in several letters to Russian Ministers of Health, and senior U.S. officials brought up the subject in discussions with Russian health officials. In late 2007, the Russian side indicated vaguely that the first two projects would be restarted, while the antivirals project would require additional review and changes. Dr. Onishchenko made a similar statement to a senior HHS delegation in May 2008 (ref A), but without giving a date for resumption of the projects. Vector's Director, Dr. Ilya Drozdov, told HHS DAS Gerald Parker in February 2009 that he was not aware of the reasons behind the delay in approval, but he noted that the GOR was providing significant funding for smallpox research and was considering building a new facility for it (ref B). Drozdov told us that the funding came from the Federal Targeted Program on Chemical and Biological Safety, approved in October 2008.

THE NAGGING ISSUE OF ACCESS

14. (SBU) The stipulation that U.S. government personnel have periodic physical access to Vector probably contributed to Onishchenko's decision to refuse extending the three smallpox

MOSCOW 00002199 002.2 OF 002

projects. In recent years, U.S. project partners have only rarely received access to Vector's facilities. Under Russian procedures, partners must request access at least 60 days in advance, and Dr. Onishchenko must approve the requests personally. With isolated exceptions, those requests have been rejected or gone unanswered for the past two years. In a recent example, in April 2009, Rospotrebnadzor declined a Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) request for USG personnel to meet with Vector personnel on site or in Moscow to verify that work was completed on a biosafety enhancement project. When U.S. partners counterproposed a teleconference with Vector personnel, Vector responded that written permission would be required. Onishchenko in July rejected another ISTC proposal for USG-funded biomedical research cooperation between Vector and the Tarasevich Institute of Standardization and Control of Biomedical Preparations, reportedly declaring, "We don't need any more projects with ISTC." Most recently, a Defense Contract Audit Agency delegation canceled a planned August visit to Russia for audits of Biotechnology Engagement Program (BTEP)-funded projects at Vector and other facilities, because with one week remaining before the visit, Rospotrebnadzor had not yet approved access to Vector.

COMMENT: HOW TO CONTINUE SMALLPOX COOPERATION?

15. (SBU) Onishchenko's response appears to rule out U.S. government-financed collaboration with Russia on smallpox. We do not believe that Onishchenko denied the proposal only because of the U.S. origin or ISTC management of the funds. Rather, Russian authorities are wary of any U.S. government cooperation with Vector. So we see little hope for direct U.S. access to Vector and probably to other similar facilities controlled by Rospotrebnadzor, such as the Center for Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology at Obolensk. The decision on joint smallpox research also suggests that the Russian government remains unconcerned by the growing chorus of voices at the World Health Organization's World Health Assembly calling for a WHO resolution to destroy official smallpox repositories.

16. (SBU) Despite these negative signals, however, there are other

signs that Onishchenko may allow Vector to collaborate with the international scientific community on public health issues of global concern. In June 2009, Vector was designated as a World Health Organization (WHO) collaborating center on avian (H5N1) influenza, the result of an application filed on Onishchenko's initiative more than two years earlier. If the USG views cooperation on smallpox with Russia as still being valuable, even without physical access to Vector, and with limited access to its scientists, post believes it would be worthwhile to pursue discussions on the subject with the GOR.

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